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ABSTRACT

This digest reviews perspectives on the supervisory relationship from the recent supervision literature. It examines the relative importance of the relationship within the total supervision process; variables which influence the relationship; and how the relationship differs when working with experienced versus inexperienced counselors. The supervisory relationship is influenced by personal characteristics, some static and others dynamic in nature. Among static factors are: gender and sex role attitudes; and supervisor's style, age, and race. Dynamic sources include stages of the relationship and relationship dynamics such as power and intimacy. Two other sources of dynamic influence on the supervisory relationship are mentioned: (1) ambiguity, or uncertainty about supervisory expectations and methods of evaluation; and (2) role conflict, or expectations associated with the role of student in contrast with the role of counselor and colleague. The digest concludes with a list of five final notes on the supervisory relationship. Contains 9 references. (NB)

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ERIC CLEARINGHOUSE ON Counseling And Student Services

ERIC DIGEST

April 1994 EDO-CG-94-11

THE SUPERVISORY RELATIONSHIP

Allan Dye

Overview

All conversation about supervision contains messages, implicit if not explicit, about the supervisory relationship. Those who perform supervision are necessarily in contact with those whom they supervise; some sort of relationship exists. In its broadest sense the term "relationship" refers merely to the manner in which the supervisor and counselor are connected as they work together to meet their goals, some of which are common and some of which are idiosyncratic. Within the context of particular supervisory orientations, however, the nature and function of the relationship must be defined in specific terms.

This Digest reviews perspectives on the supervisory relationship which have been described in the recent supervision literature. For purposes of organizational clarity, three dimensions will be addressed: the relative importance of the relationship within the total supervision process; variables which influence the relationship; and how the relationship differs when working with experienced versus inexperienced counselors.

Members of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) rated supervisor personal traits and qualities and facilitating skills as more important than conceptual skills, intervention skills, management skills, and knowledge of program management and supervision. Respondents rejected the notion that these traits and qualities cannot be taught, that they are the products of life-long socialization (Dye, 1987). These results suggest that the ability to form and sustain relationships is more important than certain knowledge and skill factors, and that effective supervisory behaviors can be learned.

Current descriptions of counseling supervision invariably include discussion of the supervisor-counselor relationship, and the means by which the individuals communicate, manage the process of reciprocal influence, affiliate, make decisions, and accomplish their respective tasks. However, the relative importance of the relationship and the role it plays varies according to supervisory orientation. For some, the relationship is the *sine qua non* of supervision (Freeman, 1992) while for others it is a necessary but less-than-defining variable (Linehan, Ch. 13, and Wessler & Ellis, Ch. 14, both in Hess, 1980). Thus, while the nature and function of the relationship differ according to several variables, which are discussed below, recent supervision literature usually includes explicit attention to this vital process.

The supervisory relationship is subject to influence by personal characteristics of the participants and by a great many demographic variables. Several major sources of influence, some static and others dynamic in nature, have been identified and discussed in reviews of the supervision literature. Among static factors receiving prominent attention are gender and sex role attitudes, supervisor's style, age, race and ethnicity, and personality characteristics (Borders & Leddick, 1987; Leddick & Dye, 1987). Dynamic sources are those which may exist at only certain stages of the relationship or which are always present but in varying degrees or forms, such as process variables (stages: beginning vs. advanced; long term vs. time limited); and relationship dynamics (resistance, power, intimacy, parallel process, and the like) (Borders et al., 1991). Conflict, the nature and magnitude of which is likely to change across time, can have a significant influence upon the relationship. Bernard and Goodyear (1992) pointed out that conflict occurs in all relationships, and in the supervisory relationship, specifically, some common origins are the power differential between the parties, differences relative to the appropriateness of technique, the amount of direction and praise, and willingness to resolve differences. These influences can be moderated to some extent by mutual respect. Because of the greater power inherent in the role, the supervisor should take the lead in modeling this attitude if it is to be attained by both parties (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992).

Citing their own and others' research, Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993) presented an extensive description of effective supervision of the beginning and advanced graduate students. They concluded that "There is reasonable validity to the perspective that what is good supervision depends on the developmental level of the candidate" (1993, p. 396). Supervisors of beginning students should provide high levels of encouragement, support, feedback, and structure. They explained carefully that the relationship with advanced students is typically more complex because students at this stage tend to vacillate between feeling professionally insecure and professionally competent. The supervisor should take responsibility for creating, maintaining, and monitoring the relationship which serves to provide structure and a mediating role while students are in turmoil (Ronnestad & Skovholt, 1993). Thus, supervisors of inexperienced counselors serve in a well-defined role as patient teachers; there is an emphasis upon structure and instruction. As students acquire experience, the need for instruction

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diminishes, and it is the supervisory relationship which provides a supportive context as advanced students assess and reassess their professional competencies and personal qualifications.

Two additional sources of dynamic influence on the supervisory relationship have been identified by Olk and Friedlander as role ambiguity and role conflict (1993). Role ambiguity is defined as uncertainty about supervisory expectations and methods of evaluation, while role conflict refers to expectations associated with the role of student in contrast with the role of counselor and colleague. Olk and Friedlander found that role ambiguity was more prevalent across training levels than role conflict, but that the effects diminished as the student gained counseling experience. Role conflict, however, seems to be more prevalent among those with more experience. They suggested that supervisors remain alert for signs of such conflict, and that teaching explicitly about roles and expectations may minimize threats to the supervisory relationship (Olk & Friedlander, 1993). These results relative to implications for the relationship as a consequence of learning stage are consistent with those of Ronnestad and Skovholt (1993), described above.

Final Notes

1. The body of literature on the subject of counseling supervision, including the supervisory relationship, has grown rapidly during recent years.
2. Instructional materials for teaching supervision methods and processes are available.
3. Knowledge of the supervisory relationship and competencies in establishing and maintaining effective relationships can be acquired through a combination of didactic, laboratory, and practical experience.
4. The supervisory relationship is an integral component in virtually all supervision orientations, though important differences exist in quality and function.
5. The definition of an appropriate and effective supervisory relationship varies according to several identifiable fixed (static) and changeable (dynamic) variables. The relationship should be structured accordingly with the knowledge and consent of both supervisor and counselor.

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